The Auditory Imagination and the Polyphony of Listening: a study of Chantal Akerman's *South* (1999)

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A percussive concoction of mechanical sounds, nature sounds, metallic humming and sinister rumbles dominates the sonic experience of Chantal Akerman's *South* (1999). *South* is a documentary shot in Jasper County, Texas, in the aftermath of the racially motivated murder of an African American musician, named James Byrd, Jr., by three white supremacists. The film's editor, Claire Atherton, insists that *South* is not 'about' racism in a thematic sense. It is not about the black community, or the history of slavery, or even the murder itself but it is predominantly concerned with feelings and with 'the dialectic between the present, the landscapes, this murder and the past'.[1] Struck by the violent silence and heat of the deep South, Akerman sought to understand how a bloody history can be evoked by and inscribed in the bucolic surroundings. She wanted to express the nauseous 'feeling of horror' arising from 'almost too much happiness', stirred up in Renoirian fashion by an innocent trip to the countryside.[2]

It is important to recognise that the 'silences' in *South* are brimming with sound. The ambient sound functions as a kind of relative silence that highlights the presence of an active listener. Critics of the film tend to ignore the auditory dynamics shaping the dialectic between present and past. Rose Capp describes the film as 'disconcertingly naïve', a film whose 'roll-call of interviewees foregrounds Akerman's allegiances, while failing to illuminate the problems of American racial politics.' She suggests that the horrifying accounts of the murder, along with the footage of the memorial service, 'border on the exploitative', while the repetitive images of the church, the streets and the countryside make Akerman's 'formalist obsessions' resemble a kind of conceit.[3] Jonathan Rosenbaum's disparaging appraisal compares *South* to 'sympathetic tourism', arguing that Akerman's 'lack of a personal connection to the American

South' forces her to 'function mostly as a journalist'. Commenting on the final tracking shot of the road along which Byrd, Jr.'s body, chained to a pick-up truck, was dragged, Rosenbaum concludes that Akerman can only 'bear mute witness to the crime'.[4] However, her wordless act of witnessing does not take place in a vacuum. By discounting the expressive significance of the ambient soundscape that draws attention to the silent but active listening presence of the filmmaker and her crew, Rosenbaum fails to truly listen to the sequence. As the work of psychoanalyst Dori Laub has confirmed, the process of bearing witness to a trauma must include a listener. The whole of *South* can be thought of as a testimonial process that requires 'a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other* – in the position of one who hears.'[5]

I will approach the film from an auditory perspective, inspired by Don Ihde's phenomenological exploration of silence and the 'polyphony of experience', an expression he uses to account for the role of the imagination in one's auditory experience of the world. Rather than listening monophonically to sound's perceptual presence, polyphonic listening means attending also to the ways in which we imaginatively hear or remember a sound. In *South*, the active silences, made palpable by the open landscape shots, resemble negative spaces that give material form to a persistent feeling of absence. I will suggest that the aural force of these shots transforms them into transitory listening spaces, whose reverberant presence forbids the erasure of history and denies a comfortable closure on past trauma. The sensory richness and historical weight of these listening spaces weakens the gravitational pull of the interviews themselves, compelling the audience to listen to the layered visions and sounds of buried pasts, connected to disparate sites of racialised violence. Drawing on Max Silverman's concept of palimpsestic memory, I contend that *South* performs 'a politics of memory founded on a poetics of memory.' This is a hybrid conception of memory functioning as a dynamic, critical space that 'opens up the bland surface of the present to the "knotted intersections" of history.'[6] Informed by Paul Gilroy's work on cultural memory and Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional

memory, palimpsestic memory counters the compartmentalisation of memory based on an ethnic essentialism, and it opposes notions of 'competitive memory' and comparative atrocities, by perceiving memories alongside other memories, forming potential 'solidarities across lines of ethno-cultural division'.[7] In my analysis, notions of 'alongside' and 'across' will also be interpreted along sonic lines, in terms of resonance and reverberation. In a broader sense, my study is supported by two conceptions of the imagination that I construe in terms of listening: one is set out by Toni Morrison in her essay 'The Site of Memory' (1987), and the other by Hannah Arendt in 'Understanding and Politics' (1954).

Imagination, listening and emotional memory

Arendt describes her conception of imagination through reference to a biblical source, citing King Solomon's old prayer to God for the gift of an 'understanding heart' ['*leb shama*']. She equates the power of the imagination to the capacity to 'catch at least a glimpse of the always frightening light of truth.'[8] Yet she disregards the significance of the Hebrew expression '*leb shama*', where *shama* means 'to hear, listen to, obey' and *leb* connotes 'the inner man, mind, will, heart, or understanding'.[9] This observation foregrounds the relationship between listening and the ability to make wise ethical judgments. Arendt then elaborates, associating the imagination with the dialogue of understanding:

> Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding (…).[10]

Akerman's sensitivity to the framing of each shot and the boundaries of silence generates a posture of receptivity, in the production of her cinema of listening, whose most distinctive trait is a need for connection with the other and a need to distance the other.

Just as Arendt associates the imagination with the glimpsing of a truth, Morrison is less concerned with the difference between fact and fiction than she is with fact and truth, remarking that truth relies on human intelligence to exist. At the start of her essay, she positions herself as an African American woman writer. Her literary heritage comprises the autobiography, whose print origins in black literature lie in African American slave narratives. Working against the tradition of erasure that plagued the slave narrative, whereby gruesome details of the writer's traumatic experiences were omitted to avoid offending the white reader, Morrison's task, as a twentieth-century writer, is 'to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate."'[11] She comments on Simone de Beauvoir's recounting of her mother's death in *A Very Easy Death* (1964), and on James Baldwin's depiction of his relationship with his father in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). Distinguishing herself from these authors, who move from 'the event to the image that it left', Morrison moves in reverse: to expose a glimmer of truth pertaining to the interior life of people whose stories remain unwritten, Morrison insists that the image 'comes first and tells me what the "memory" is about.'[12] Her notion of 'image' denotes not a symbol but a '"picture" and the feelings that accompany the picture.' Since she cannot rely solely on her own memories, or on the recollections of others, to access these missing stories, Morrison must turn to the act of imagination. Naming her approach a form of 'literary archaeology', she explains: '[o]n the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply.'[13] The atmosphere of emotion surrounding the 'picture' that Morrison describes, echoes Arendt's association of the imagination with the 'peculiar density' surrounding all that is real.[14]

For Morrison, imagination is entangled with memory and she uses the metaphor of the Mississippi River, when it floods the surrounding region, to convey the act of remembering in terms of a rush of imagination. The water breaks its banks because it is remembering where it was before the river was 'straightened out' to allow for the building of new homes. She compares the memory of water to that of writers, who, as sentient beings, attempt to remember the sensory details of where they were, including 'what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place.' Morrison clarifies that as a black woman writer, to 'extend, fill in and complement' slave narratives, or to reconstruct a world inhabited by people who have been excluded from the discourse purporting to be 'about' them, she must also engage the imagination.

The displacement involved in the writer's act of remembering recalls Akerman's journeying from East Germany to Moscow during the making of *D'Est* (1993), that unlocked an unknown site of trauma – the self-proclaimed 'primal scene' of her oeuvre – connected to her mother's non-narrated traumatic past.[15] Morrison's understanding of imaginative recollection resonates with Akerman's desire to fill in the blanks of her own story ('a story full of holes' due to the absence of family memories) with imaginary memories.[16] The process of remembering as a kind of 'flooding', that is bound to the imagination, is described by Morrison as 'emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared.'[17] Merging the singular with the collective, the process of emotional memory, which surges forth arbitrarily and uncontrollably, permits deep emotions and sensations, buried in the historical unconscious, to surface.

Comparable to Morrison's practice of literary excavation, Akerman journeys to a site, at once familiar and unfamiliar, and creatively reconstructs a world. She does so by imaginatively grasping the feeling-states arising from her sensory experience of place, which is charged with the affective content of the stories she hears and with her own imagined

memories connected to the traces left by the historical trauma of the Holocaust. As I will demonstrate, through the relational encounters she stages with the sonorous 'face' of the landscape, Akerman cinematically renders something of the interior life of Jasper and its people, but only by accessing the blanks of her own interior life, as part of the hybrid poetics of memory that lies at the heart of *South*.

The final shot of the film allegorises this process of imaginative recollection by taking us on a literal journey down the road where the victim's body was so brutally dragged. The prior interview with a local resident named John Craig, who conveys the horror of Byrd, Jr.'s murder by noting where his body was progressively dismembered, generates disturbing images in the spectator's mind that heighten the intensity of the disorientating emotion felt during the ghostly re-enactment that follows. The tracking shot polyphonically fuses imaginative and perceptual modes of experience, a process that depends on an ability to listen to the active silences and see beyond the immediately visible. The camera aligns the spectator with the sensorial position of the killers, who would have felt corporeally, but from the safe distance of their vehicle, the bumps in the road, the vibrations of the engine and the rumbling soundscape. Refusing to turn away from abhorrent brutality, Akerman places herself alongside the spectator in a non-neutral position, as they look back at the road from the raised vantage point of the truck, coming face-to-face with a disturbing complicity, whose irresolution ensures its endurance in the spectator's mind.

From monophonic to polyphonic listening

From the opening credits of the film, the sound of nature's (artificial) paradise lulls us into a false sense of security. We sense that the peacefulness is hiding something sinister. Could the buzzing sound signal flies and the presence of a rotting corpse? By giving prominence to the

ambient sound design from the start, Akerman cultivates a sort of hyperrealist silence, tasked with teaching us how to listen to its fullness. As Laub instructs in his essay on listening to trauma, this skilled activity demands that we 'recognize, acknowledge and address that silence, even if this simply means respect – and knowing how to wait.'[18] Ihde describes listening and waiting as a '"letting be" which allows that which continuously "is given" into space and time to be noted', and this process of waiting constitutes a 'listening to silence which surrounds sound.'[19]

When Akerman searches for the right distance from which to film, she is not only concerned with the visual parameters of the shot but with the silences that infuse each image and surround each instance of speech. Ihde suggests that silence can be understood as a visual category because it is given in absence. It belongs to 'mute objects' such as a vase, a pen or a tree, and to 'the syncopation of experiences in which what is seen seems silent while what is not seen may sound.'[20] In *South*, this mute presence constitutes a relative silence that resides in the gaps between the interview scenes, namely, in the discomforting tranquillity of the landscape shots. The film's intensification of the ambient soundscape shifts our attention to the hidden side of the visible image. Ihde writes: '[w]hen I view a thing it presents itself to me with *a face*. A deeper and more careful analysis reveals that it is not just *a surface* face, but a face that is an appearance that presents itself as "having a back" as well.'[21] Significantly, *South* begins not with a human face but with a mix of sounds that signal an active silence. The first shot is composed of a Baptist church and a field, accompanied by the diegetic sound of a man cutting grass. This locatable sound is unsettled by disorienting rumbles. I hear the blocks of background sound that permeate *South* as interstices or syncopations that resemble negative spaces in sculptural art works. As the film progresses, they enable Akerman to denaturalise the verbal authority of the interviews, freeing her to address the silent 'back' of the face-to-face encounter, which is also a listening encounter, displacing the focus from individual memories

to collective histories. These histories require the audience to participate in a process of listening as a form of witnessing, but a listening attuned to sensory qualities as much as to the narrational act.

The first tracking shot takes place along a street, showing the fronts of people's houses. The curved sides of the frame indicate the presence of the filmmaker who we presume is positioned inside a car looking out through the window. These dark corners at the edges of the screen return throughout the film and highlight the impure, mediated nature of the spectacle, reminding us of Akerman's presence as a listener, an interviewer and a witness. Yet they also carry connotations of the disciplinary regime of surveillance, marking Akerman's self-critical awareness of her role as a controlling 'overseer'. Nevertheless, following Laub, her primary posture is that of an empathetic listener, whose duty throughout the testimonial process is 'to be *unobtrusively present*'.[22] A man drives past in his white truck and he waves at the camera and utters some words, perhaps thanking the crew for giving way, staging an initial encounter between the receptivity of the spectating subject and the communicative presence of the other. As the engine sounds soften, the spectator is adequately primed to listen, alongside the filmmaker, to the first interview that ensues with a woman named Cora Jones.

This is where Ihde's concept of the polyphony of experience can offer a fresh perspective on the interview scenes that appear on first glance as isolated talking-head shots, contained and reified by the camera. Positioned in a rocking-chair on her porch and surrounded by her children, when Cora begins to speak we listen to her voice monophonically, as the receiver of its sound, while tuning in cerebrally to the content of her words. Gradually, though, the audience becomes aware of the 'second modality of experience' outlined by Ihde, consisting of the copresence of imagination.[23] We notice the wooden lattice behind Cora that kindles the prison metaphor haunting the *mise en scène* in many of Akerman's films and is redolent of her mother's harrowing experiences in the death camps.[24] We also notice the silent

presence of Cora's children, who communicate through the hidden language of their inner thoughts, hinted at via their facial expressions and fidgety movements. At the same time, we become aware of the fragility of Cora's speech. This occurs when we hear a car passing, the muffled squeak of its horn and remnants of the buzzing nature sounds. These sonic details remind us of the dubiously anodyne soundscape from the film's opening that could at any moment rush in and overwhelm Cora's words.

Our auditory memory of these earlier sounds doubles the perceived sound of Cora's audible speech, shifting our listening from the monophonic to the polyphonic mode. The accumulation of marginal sonic and kinetic details causes the scene to stammer and reminds us that the interviewee's speech is part of an ideologically constructed soundtrack. For example, the fidgety rustlings form a line of solidarity with the gentle diegetic clicking sound from a prior shot of a woman sitting alone on her porch, preparing the edible parts of a vegetable. This precise sound of an everyday chore, that has a clear directional location, is cushioned by an ambiguous metallic whirring. This sonic blend then evolves into the clinking of a KCS tanker train that is seen rattling past in the next shot, as if to implicitly reference Holocaust journeys to the camps. The rattling sound mutates into the engine sounds accompanying the aforementioned tracking shot, which ricochets with the film's final shot of the deserted road, raising questions of complicity with the white supremacist killers. Akerman's soundtrack becomes meaningful in an accumulative manner as she crafts an aural archive from the sounds of everyday life, blemished by audio-visual memories of unconscionable horror. The interview with Cora, then, is not as isolated as it might appear because it forms part of a wider testimonial process of listening that blurs the lines between the individual and the collective, and between perpetrator, spectator and victim, producing a hybrid critical space activated by the imaginative act.

A long shot follows the interview, expanding our perceptive field from the personal to the communal. Our auditory focus is also enlarged as we engage in a 'field state' mode of listening that according to Ihde corresponds to 'the visual taking in of an entire vista'.[25] We see members of the congregation leaving the church, possibly exiting the memorial service of Byrd, Jr. that features later. This outdoor shot is accompanied by the rousing sound of singing emanating from the interior. The lengthy duration of this shot that constitutes the aftermath of Cora's narration, offers an interlude for reflection. This listening space allows the palimpsestic interconnections to surface between the singular, racist hate crime and the wider history recounted by Cora, who speaks of racial segregation and the enslavement of African Americans before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The long take enables us to listen to the active silence of an auditory imaginative *presencing* of Cora's now absent voice that resounds in our mind.

The acousmatic sound of singing involves us in an aural scene of community, as the excesses of the auditory imagination mobilise the prior interview whose presence loiters on. The spectator's imagined auditory appearance of Cora mingles with the audible chorus of the bereaved, producing a polyphony of experience that combines the perceptual with the imaginative, and the present with the immediate past. Atherton explains how the images surrounding Cora's interview do not *illustrate* her words, for, she is 'in resonance with' the other images.[26] The informative power of her speech is not permitted to dominate, but it exists as one element alongside the other images and sounds that make contact with each other owing to the binding temporal flow of reverberation.

South's reverberant aesthetic of 'alongside' engenders the 'politics of sides' that Sara Ahmed describes in her discussion of Countee Cullen's poem 'Tableau', cited by So Mayer in their captivating study of *South*. Ahmed writes: 'one is not asked to "take sides" when one is "beside" – one walks beside and alongside.'[27] This 'radicalization of the side', which can be

discerned in the poem's reference to a black boy and a white boy walking together in unison, whose proximity, Ahmed argues, produces a queer effect, is intensified in *South* through its privileging of what I have called the 'back' of the interview, which echoes Ahmed's construal of 'the inverted face'. She writes that for Merleau-Ponty, whose description of the face as an 'oriented' object gains its significance from its orientation, then if the face was inverted, becoming 'queer', by no longer facing 'the right way', it would be deprived of its significance. For Ahmed, this is the moment when the face 'slips away' to become distant and oblique to what coheres along privileged heteronormative lines, which are racially regulated so as to remain free from racial impurity, invisibly coded as white. Ahmed suggests that a queer orientation might involve seeing the inverted face not as marred by a loss of significance, but that through its 'retreat', a path is cleared for 'new shapes and directions' to emerge.[28]

Whilst Mayer proposes that *South* fails to become a surface for proximity 'between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet*', referencing Ahmed's discussion of the queer disorientation of the black body, I want to suggest that the listening spaces in *South* accent the moment when the interview 'slips', creating the possibility for 'new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to read'.[29] The breathing space given to the auditory imagination provides an unseen surface for contact that requires one to listen backwards, forwards and diagonally across the film.

During the shot described above, following Cora's interview, we see a girl, dressed in a bright yellow dress, leaving the church. She walks towards the camera, positioned between several rows of black and white parked cars. The vibrancy of her dress and the positioning of her body offer hope that, by claiming the space 'in between' the cars, the essentialising binary of black versus white could be undone. This dream is short-lived as she trails off to the side, leaving the dichotomy in place. However, the girl soon reappears, returning to the centre of the shot, swinging her arms and glancing back knowingly at the camera. Then a young man exits

the church and walks the path she forged, striding between the cars, followed by a little boy, as if to secure a new route for the next generation. Finally, the girl returns and begins to walk again towards the camera, now joined by another girl, who is wearing a similar yellow dress, and an older woman dressed in pink. They pass triumphantly together, as an all-female unit, through the space 'in-between'. This sequence functions only on a symbolic level, but it constitutes an example of what Mayer shrewdly identifies as a 'minor model of solidarity and collaboration' that also 'suggests a queer possibility' by gesturing towards a future of greater cross-racial union.[30]

Insert Figure 1

The duration of this shot permits the stammering of Cora's interview to join forces with the sensorial power of yellow. This layering of sound, speech and colour forms an imaginary parental bond between Cora and the girl, perhaps suggestive of Akerman's personal desire for greater connection with her mother. The shot of the girls walking together between the cars simultaneously hints at a queer moment, owing to the sensory excess produced by the bright colours, enhanced by the spectator's imaginative recollection of the chorus of voices that resounded moments earlier. Calling to mind other disorienting moments of domestic disorder and sensory disruption in Akerman's films, this confluence of sensation allows Cora, the girl and her female companions to temporarily transcend the constraints of the frame.

Listening beyond a lenticular logic

Whilst neither Capp nor Rosenbaum listen closely to the sonic construction of *South*, the crux of each critic's argument is important to consider. They point to the lack of any sustained attempt, on Akerman's part, to turn her critical gaze on the racial construction of whiteness. The disembodied status of the filmmaker and crew can be deemed problematic in that it adds

fuel to the dangerous notion of whiteness as an unmarked, invisible norm, against which the racialised other is defined. In Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, this danger is encapsulated by her analogy of the fishbowl: she sees the fish moving, surrounded by traces of foliage, food and bubbles. Then suddenly she notices the bowl itself, 'the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.'[31] The bowl represents the concealed ideology of whiteness that surrounds the fish, controlling how race is represented in the American literary imagination. Citing bell hooks's critique of *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990), Mayer takes up this line of thought, suggesting that Akerman fails to show clearly enough 'WHO made this picture'. For Mayer, Akerman's absence from the frame 'could be said, at its extremes, to assume "an imperial overseeing position that is in no way progressive or counterhegemonic".'[32] Akerman can certainly be criticised for not engaging more overtly with the interracial harmony that exists in Jasper, and for not proactively highlighting the town's history of activist struggles that made cross-racial alliance possible. The lack of scrutiny given to the South's expanding population and its economic and technological advances, misleadingly accentuates the reverse picture of poverty and negativity, as Marie Liénard warns in her analysis of the film.[33] However, the neglected role of the soundtrack and the hybrid conception of memory that *South* enacts, means that it cannot be so easily dismissed for presenting a static vision of race, anchored in the black/white axis that supports the binary logic central to white supremacy.

South's hyperbolic display of black versus white intentionally throws light on the visual codes of race by performatively staging the 'monocular' logic of racial visibility that Tara McPherson terms a 'lenticular logic'. A lenticular image consists of the combining of two distinct images but when viewed through a lenticular lens, one can only see one of the two images at a time. This logic refuses copresence and allows 'whiteness to float free from blackness', denying 'productive overlap or connection, forestalling doubled vision and

precluding alliance.'[34] The visual patterning of black and white cars, black and white tankers, images of white birds perched next to water, followed by a shot of a brown calf swimming, are uncomfortably marked by the separatist logic of the lenticular. As Liénard notes, these images are fleetingly offset by an image of a brown puppy and a blonde puppy, filmed within the same frame, playing together in the grass, thus raising the possibility of coexistence.[35] Significantly, the listener is not confined to such a rigid and superficial epidermal logic, and it is the soundtrack that lifts the film out of a regressive, binary simulation of racial difference. By teaching the spectator to listen to the relative silences, Akerman punctuates the superimpositions and reverberations that can be linked to the non-lenticular power of doubled vision, whose aural counterpart is polyphonic listening, which requires an attentiveness to the copresence of perceptual *and* imaginative modes of experience.

One of the interviewees, Dereck Mohammed, states that the goal of white supremacists is to restore white pride to Jasper by eradicating the presence of black people. He refers to the period of anxiety following Emancipation, when white masculine supremacy feared African American men becoming 'real men'. Here he is alluding to the ingrained association of the black male with the phallic lack of the feminine, as Robyn Wiegman underlines in her study of the practice of lynching in the United States. She states that this association had been brutally materialised 'through the frequent accompaniment of castration and lynching', a legacy referenced in *South* during the interviews with Mrs Callins and Jonathan Callins.[36]

Akerman cites Baldwin's evocation of lynching trees as a key influence on *South*. In 'Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter From the South', Baldwin describes his first impressions of the 'rust-red earth' of Georgia, as his plane hovered over the treetops before landing: 'I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its colour from the blood that had dripped down from these trees. My mind was filled with the image of a black man, younger than I, perhaps, or my own age, hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex

from him with a knife.'[37] Three open landscape shots of trees follow Dereck's interview: the first and third feature a reappearance of the dark curves framing the shot, reminding us of Akerman's close listening presence. The second shows a barbed wire fence in front of a field. This lengthy shot is accompanied by the rustling of crickets and the sound of a helicopter, suggesting punitive regimes of surveillance. The rumblings of a train and the increasing volume of ambient sound attunes our attention to the inhuman hum of cinema's own act of remembering. Indeed, this shot recalls the opening images, filmed at Auschwitz, of barbed wire, grass and trees in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), accompanied by Jean Cayrol's voiceover alluding to the landscape's apparent tranquillity.

Akerman's reimagining of the deep South does not present a neatly contained world that bears no relation to the world outside the curved 'bowl' of its frame. *South* spills over the edges of its geographic location and engenders a form of 'concentrationary memory' that Silverman distinguishes from 'Holocaust memory' through its denial of specificity, evading 'any such ethno-cultural or religious particularization'. It shows us 'how the particular is always haunted by its absent other', thereby contaminating the lenticular logic with a spectral copresence.[38] The spindly metallic sound accompanying the third landscape shot is almost violent. It charges the mute object of the silvery tree – the inverted face – that faces us, with the absent depth of its 'other side', namely, the sound of silence. This silence constitutes the ghostly memory of an act of lynching, doubled by the echoes of the death camps from the previous shot. The shot of the tree is ever so slightly tainted by the curve at the bottom left-hand corner of the screen.

Insert Figure 2

To an extent, these recurrent window shots, indicating the director's listening presence, articulate an acknowledgement of the privileged context of whiteness within which she is

operating. Yet it is vital to recognise that they also point up an awareness of the racial ambivalence of her Jewishness, as a queer Jewish woman, and this acknowledgement cannot be separated from her status as a white Francophone filmmaker. *South* performs moments of contact across history that sees Akerman's subjective questioning of racist ideology and racialised violence, put anti-black racism and white supremacy into dialogue with evocations of Jewish oppression, through her staging of concentrationary memory.

As she crafts a cinematic archaeology of her own, Akerman listens with and beyond the facts of the crime and the content of the testimonies, tracing, via the distancing and proximity of her camera, the 'emotional memory' of shared human suffering. The multidirectional nature of her engagement with memory and trauma cannot be deemed merely journalistic. Neither can it be understood in a 'them/us' imperialistic vein, serving an individualistic journey of self-discovery, dependent on the insights offered by the 'other', whose presence is erased in the process. Not seeking to compare atrocities, *South* creates 'negative' listening spaces conducive to a contrapuntal idea of memory as an imaginative act, that gives form to the 'non-forms' of hidden voices, stories and histories. In exploiting the full silence of ambient sound, *South* compels the audience to confront their role as active listeners absorbed in the polyphony of experience. By listening polyphonically to the film, weaving perceptual and imaginative experience into a complex form of copresence, the spectator participates in the cinematic process of imaginative recollection and reconstruction. The protean nature of this process prevents the congealing of an *unfelt*, monologic interpretation that turns away from the vivid presentness of the past.

NOTES

[1] Tina Poglajen, 'Interview: Claire Atherton', *Film Comment*, 2 November 2016, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-claire-atherton/>, consulted 1 July 2019.

[2] Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 111.

[3] Rose Capp, 'Akerman Resists Southern Comfort', *Senses of Cinema*, 6 (May 2000), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/feature-articles/south/>, consulted 15 July 2019.

[4] Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'Place and Displacement: Akerman and Documentary', *Jonathan Rosenbaum*, March 29 2016, <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2016/03/place-and-displacement-akerman-and-documentary/>, consulted 1 February 2019.

[5] Dori Laub, M.D., 'Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening' in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57–74 (70), original emphasis.

[6] Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 8 and 22.

[7] Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory*, 20–21.

[8] Hannah Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)' in *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 307–32 (322).

[9] Richard Blackaby (ed.), *Blackaby Study Bible: Personal Encounters with God Through His Word* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 400.

[10] Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', 323.

[11] Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', 237–38.

[12] Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', 239–40.

[13] Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', 238.

[14] Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', 322.

[15] Griselda Pollock, *After-affects/After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 328.

[16] Janet Bergstrom suggests that most of Akerman's films are motivated by the need to *create* memories in order 'to mourn and to make up for the disruption of a continuous oral tradition passed down from one generation to the next, most importantly from mother to daughter.' See Bergstrom, 'Invented Memories' in Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, ed., *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1999), 94–116 (98).

[17] Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', 243.

[18] Laub, 'Bearing Witness', 58.

[19] Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd edn (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 109–11.

[20] Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 110.

[21] Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 110.

[22] Laub, 'Bearing Witness', 71.

[23] Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 117.

[24] Marion Schmid, 'The Cinema Films Back: Colonialism, Alterity and Resistance in Chantal Akerman's *La Folie Almay*er', *Australian Journal of French Studies* 51: 1, 22–34 (27).

[25] Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 102.

[26] Claire Atherton, 'The Art of Editing', Masterclass from the Tel-Aviv International Student Film Festival, 11 June 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uW8yuCkwjZw>, consulted 10 April 2019 [31:30].

[27] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 169.

[28] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 171–72.

[29] So Mayer, 'Texas (is not Paris) is Burning: The Drag of Dis/Orientation in Chantal Akerman's *Sud*' in *Chantal Akerman: Afterlives*, edited by Marion Schmid and Emma Wilson (Oxford: Legenda, 2019), 102–14 (106); Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 171.

[30] Mayer, 'Texas (is not Paris) is Burning', 108. I am indebted to Emma Wilson and attendees of the Cambridge Film and Screen Studies research seminar (October 2018) for their invaluable feedback on my initial analysis of this sequence.

[31] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 17.

[32] Mayer, 'Texas (is not Paris) is Burning', 109–13.

[33] Marie Liénard, '*Sud* de Chantal Akerman ou une histoire de territoire et de terre: le Sud comme espace de mémoire', *Caliban: French Journal of English Studies*, 19 (2006), 131–138 (para. 26), <https://journals.openedition.org/caliban/2416#bodyftn10>.

[34] Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7 and 27.

[35] Liénard, '*Sud* de Chantal Akerman, para. 25.

[36] Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 14.

[37] James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 88; Chantal Akerman, *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou/Cahiers du cinéma, 2004), 233.

[38] Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory*, 48.